

Mistake-Proof Your Parenting

No one's the perfect mom or dad! But here are a few common missteps we all tend to make—and how to avoid them.

WRITTEN BY ANDREA PYROS

Parenting, as every sleep-deprived one of us can attest, is hard work. Wonderful, rewarding, meaningful and difficult. "Each stage has its challenge," from managing a toddler's tantrums to keeping teens safe from the harms of drugs, alcohol and fast cars," says Rosina McAlpine, Ph.D., founder of Australia's Win Win Parenting education program in Sydney. Unfortunately, kids don't come with an owner's manual (if only), and none of us is going to be perfect. But we can learn to avoid some common missteps that parents tend to make by patching some smart, simple strategies.

When they're babies

* Care for yourself too.

New moms are usually so busy worrying about everyone else that they don't take the time to care for themselves, says McAlpine. "They try to do it all, but an exhausted and grumpy mom is no fun for anyone. And we know that sleep deprivation can lead to physical- and mental-health issues." So don't be afraid to ask for help or too proud if someone offers to help out at home.

Taking an occasional short break doesn't mean you're abandoning your duties,

agrees David Katzner, president of The National Parenting Center, a nonprofit organization in California that helps provide parenting advice.

"Many new parents are gripped by fear or guilt when it comes to leaving their baby with someone, even if it's just

[for] a dinner out. You will come back refreshed and reconnected."

* Trust your gut.

Don't psych yourself out worrying about everything that might go wrong, advises Katzner. "Parenting an infant, especially your first, can be daunting, overwhelming, exhausting and terrifying. Here's a

secret: It doesn't have to be." The infant stage is a "magical time,"

he adds. "Your baby is learning every day, and you are too." Take a breath, get in touch

with your instincts and allow them to guide you. If you're "tense and agonizing over every decision, then you will probably make more mistakes than if you just take a moment and step back."

At the end of the day, agrees McAlpine, the most basic skills are the most important. "The key to raising a

happy and healthy baby is for moms and dads to simply respond to their child's needs. Make her feel loved with lots of cuddles and kisses. Feed your baby when he's hungry. Help her go to sleep when she's tired, with a gentle voice and touch. Support and reassure your baby when he's upset. Help your baby learn by spending quality time together talking, mimicking his facial expressions and sounds, and time for play. It's all about building a loving and trusting relationship between parent and child."

When they're toddlers

* Try saying no less often.

Your baby begins to sleep through the night, rewarding you with smiles, laughs and delightful behavior.

They've learned to walk and explore the world around them with curiosity and joy. Then the "titanical years" begin, says Katzner. From 18 months up until about 4, children discover they are individuals who have the power to refuse us or even to do the opposite of what we request. In other words, toddlers are supposed to be willful and noncompliant.

But that doesn't mean you have to live with a tiny tyrant. Absolutely go to the mat over the big things, like hitting people or buckling up in the car seat. "Actions speak louder than words. When your child breaks the rules,

New moms need downtime too! Get help when you can so you are able to take care of your own basic needs.



You got this! Trust your instincts. You know your infant and you're bound to do the right thing.

With one in five U.S. school-age children considered obese, it's never too early to start teaching healthy eating habits.

give her a two-minute time-out. You can't reason with a 2-year-old, so save the speeches," says Katzner. But don't sweat the small stuff. "Keep a sense of humor about this struggle for independence and take some pride in your child's first attempts to stand up for himself."

***Keep your cool.**

While it may be frustrating to be faced with defiance, anger and punishments inevitably only lead to more tears, tantrums and meltdowns. That doesn't mean that giving in with bribes is the way to stop the meltdown. While that broccoli might be eaten on the promise of ice cream later, parents will soon learn they have trained their children to need a reward to do basic everyday activities like eating healthy food, speaking respectfully and cooperating, says McAlpine.

Instead, try to stay calm, be patient and say yes to your toddler when you can. Whenever possible, give your child choices, such as, "Would you like your dinner on a red plate or the green plate today?" suggests McAlpine. "A little choice can go a long way [toward] a child feeling the autonomy he or she needs."

When they're preschoolers

***Instill lifelong healthy habits.**

Childhood obesity has become a major problem. The CDC reports that one in five school-age children in the U.S. is obese, and the rate of obesity has more than tripled since the 1970s.

The preschool years are a great time to build healthy nutrition habits that will benefit everyone in the household. Offering kids fresh fruit and vegetables in ready-to-eat, bite-size pieces and limiting processed foods and sugar can help. Being physically active is also good for growing bodies, and it's a fantastic way to use up all that energy kids have! Other healthy habits,



Young kids love helping out—it gives them a sense of confidence and importance.

Including cooking at home, eating meals together when possible and getting enough sleep, will benefit kids in both the short and long term.

***Set up chores.**

Even at preschool age, it's not too soon to start introducing your child to some simple chores. According to Beth Kobliner, author of *Make Your Kid a Money Genius*, even kids as young as 18 months can do simple chores like hanging up a coat or putting away their shoes. "Research demonstrates that kids who do chores become more

successful adults, possibly because of the sense of mastery that they get from a job well done or the feeling of harmony that comes from chipping in as a team player," she writes. As your child gets older, they can take on more household chores around to help out the family. Keep in mind that it's best not to pay your kids for doing chores, advises Kobliner, or suddenly you'll be negotiating how much money if I'll take for them to make their beds.

This is also a good opportunity to establish a strong work ethic. "Most people associate the word 'chores'

with something unpleasant, something we don't want to do but are forced or bribed to do," says McAlpine. Instead, reframe what chores are and how they work by using positive terms and a positive attitude. "Parents can't expect kids to tidy up after themselves or contribute around the home as a family member and enjoy it, if parents model a negative attitude to home management or are messy. Put some music on, work together to decide who does what tasks and when they are to be done, and start early—young kids love to help," she adds.

When they're in elementary school

***Set firm rules around tech.**

With practically every home hosting a slew of technology, from smartphones to consoles and computers, the battle for screen time can feel near constant. This is one area where parents need to establish firm rules, about the amount of time you're comfortable with your child having as well as concerning the content they have access to, advises Katzman. "Your vigilance cannot take a day off, because if you give an inch on this one, your kids will take a mile."

Help bickering siblings work out differences by teaching conflict resolution, acknowledging that each of them has a valid perspective.

While you're at it, monitor your own media usage. Research shows that too much screen time leads to a decrease in happiness at all ages, and it can also undermine your confidence as a parent. "Nobody puts up their worst moments, nobody's house looks like Pinterest, and every child has different struggles," says Laura Markham, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*. "Minimize your usage of social media, and you will be immeasurably happier."

***Be an arbitrator.**

Siblings fight—but if that bickering is wearing you down, consider this a good age to teach conflict resolution, says Markham. Don't jump in as judge and jury or take sides. Simply acknowledge that they both have valid perspectives, then have each hear the other out. Retraite what you're hearing in a nonaccusatory way and ask them to come up with ideas for a solution. If one kid is being nasty to another, you may need to reiterate the house rules of being kind and respectful to each other, and they can be coached in communicating in a more direct, less emotional way.

When they're teens

***Keep talking.**

Parenting a teen is famously difficult. Teens are risk-taking and thrill-seeking, with brains that are still immature when it comes to thinking ahead about different types of danger and impulsive behavior. That's why it's more important than ever to keep the lines of communication open. "Help teens and tweens to understand the many potential dangers in the world, without scaring the life out of them, and to understand that with freedom comes responsibility," notes McAlpine.

That often means cutting the straight-up lecture and encouraging more give-and-take conversation. "Talk to your kids about what they might do to keep themselves safe in various scenarios." You can also help your child focus on finding solutions to problems, rather than ruminating and being stuck, whether it means dealing with a problem at school or coping with a social issue.

***Monitor their mental health.**

Knowing when your teen's mood swings are normal rather than a cause for concern can be tricky for parents. Warning signs of a serious problem can include: Two or more weeks of feelings of sadness, anxiety and hopelessness; a lack of interest in food or compulsive overeating; changes in sleep habits; social isolation; a sudden drop in grades, cutting school or relentless rebellion; psychosomatic complaints (such as headaches, stomachaches, low-back pain or fatigue); acting out with alcohol, drug use or sexual activity; suicidal feelings and behaviors are a sign of serious depression, and they require immediate action.